Essence and Form of National-Socialism

by Joseph Goebbels, 1934

It is impossible in a temporally limited synopsis to explain comprehensively the essence-type [Wesensart] of national-socialism; it involves the consideration of a movement and idea that burst into German public life with dynamic force and altered all conditions and relationships from the bottom up. Furthermore it happens that national-socialism today represents not a become [Gewordenes] but a becoming thing [Werdendes], and that it is subject to continuing modifications and changes, and therefore cannot be defined in its totality.

We do not want to consider the entire phenomenon of national-socialism but to explain the fundamental concepts of national-socialist thinking, to reveal and delineate those pillars of thought upon which the edifice of our worldview rests, and from these fundamental concepts to derive not only the possibility but the necessity of the national-socialist reality [Realität].

Like every great worldview, national-socialism rests on a few fundamental principles that possess a deep inner meaning.

I. Clear Communication is the Prerequisite for Unity

The simple explanation of all fundamental errors in the past 14 years of German politics lies in the fact that we Germans never sort out for ourselves our questions of destiny, neither as individuals nor as an organization or party. Of course concepts were discussed; it was however impossible from the start to reach unanimity about the fundamental principles of our political thinking, since every individual derived for himself the right to see something different under these concepts. What one understood as “democracy” another regarded as

“monarchy”; one said, “black, white, red,” while another said, “black, red gold”; what one conceived as an authoritarian state, another saw as a “parliamentary system.”

We have discussed these concepts and talked ourselves red-faced. Had one taken the trouble 14 years ago at the beginning of the political discussion to clarify and establish these political concepts, what the individual really understood by “democracy” or “monarchy,” by “system” or “authoritarian state,” it would have been obvious that we Germans were indeed unanimous about the fundamental principles, but that we applied different names to them.

National-Socialism has now unified the thinking of the German folk for us without leading back to primitive archetypes [Urformen]. It has reduced the processes of politico-economic life, complicated in themselves, to their simplest formula. This resulted from the natural consideration of how to lead the broad masses of the folk back to political life. In order to find comprehension among the masses of the folk, we deliberately conduct a folk-oriented propaganda. Thus have we dragged onto the street facts that otherwise were accessible only to a few specialists and experts, and hammered them into the brain of the little man; all things were presented so simply that even the most primitive understanding could absorb them. We refused to operate with vague, watered-down, and unclear concepts, but rather stripped bare the meanings of all things.

Here lay the secret of our successes.

The bourgeois parties felt in their incomprehension that they were exalted above our “cult of primitivity.” With an elite-intellectual arrogance they sat above us as a court, and came to the false verdict that they were the statesmen and we were the drummerboys. At best they regarded us as agitators and pioneers of their bourgeois worldview. We, however, had other goals in mind than to conquer the teetering throne so that after the victory we might hand it over generously to them.

Since we possessed the ability to see and portray clearly the fundamental principles of the German situation, and of the life of the German community, we also had the power to move the broad masses of our folk toward these newly observed principles and

fundamental formulas of political life. This pure process of agitation remained on the plain of power-politics1, not without incisive results.

I see in this success the basis for a political understanding, of the Germans and their whole folk2, with the partly democratic3, fascist, or bolshevik states. If we do not apply everywhere the same method of concept-clarification, agreement is rendered impossible.

The first necessity of every political discussion rests in this delineation of concepts and explanation of principles, and it is important that one be able to anticipate political praxis from the cursory "definition" without difficulty.

Once anybody clearly recognizes the fundamental concepts, he sees with astonishment that political praxis almost organically, naturally and self-evidently results from them. It becomes obvious to him in which direction political evolution had to lead and therefore that the process that has played out in Germany since the onset of the National-Socialist Revolution also cannot be considered as finished but must be moved forward, that it can only come to an end when the national-socialist way of thinking has renovated and filled with its content all public and private life in Germany from the ground up.

II. The German Revolution

In Germany it is said: "We have made a revolution." The fewest men however know exactly what this revolution means, what it represents from a dynamic, historic, evolutionary perspective. There are even some folk-comrades who do not want to admit that a revolution has happened in Germany at all.

What is this: "a revolution"? Before the outbreak of the National-Socialist Revolution, one generally associated with that concept characteristics that were really only peripheral to the central meaning of what is revolutionary. Under "revolution" one imagined a political

process that would happen on the barricades aided by some instruments of power4 and would direct itself against the existing laws.

One knew only about the visible process, namely the violent deposing of a ruling class and the seizure of power by a new power-group proceeding with violence. The invisible conduct of a revolution however means something completely different. The barricade concept does not necessarily belong to it, as it also in no way must always be the characteristic of a true revolution.

A revolution can be completed bloodlessly and lawfully, and it is possible that a power-group goes to the barricades5 rather than leading the revolution behind the scenes.

Revolution is an inherently dynamic process with its own standard of legality. It aims to transcribe its dynamic and legality, previously belonging to the opposition, onto the legality of the state. It is completely irrelevant by what means this occurs. In qualifying a revolution, the use of violence or legality plays no role. For this, the German Revolution provides the classic proof, since it was accomplished on a legal path in meticulous compliance with the existing laws, and nevertheless has brought with it the greatest spiritual, cultural, economic, and social revolution [Umwälzung] that has ever occurred in world history. And of course that results from a special characteristic, namely that the German Revolution was made from below and not from above.

III. Revolutions from Above and from Below

There are revolutionaries from above and revolutionaries from below; they differ less by the domain that they conquer than by the durability with which they are able to maintain this domain. A revolution from above is inorganic and will usually be of historically limited significance. A revolution from below by contrast is organic and survives centuries. It is very hard, if not impossible, to impose a new legality on a folk from above without preparation; therefore revolutionaries from above generally have only a short lifespan.

Conversely, in the revolutions from below, the standard of legality is not invented by a small group of men up at the green desk6 and effected through coercion; rather it lives already in the folk below and is raised upward to full growth. If a folk is not prepared for a revolution, even if a revolutionary group takes power and has the best purpose before its eyes, not long will it have power in its possession.

Revolutions from above generally happen very quickly. A handful of generals or statesmen form a pact, cause the regime to fall, and take over the power.

Revolutions from below by contrast grow from the depths; they evolve from the smallest primordial cells of the folk; out of ten revolutionaries grow a hundred; from a thousand, a hundred-thousand, and in the blink of an eye, when the dynamic power of the revolutionary opposition is stronger than the gradually rejected apparatus of state, the revolution has been spiritually already won. With the acquisition of power and the marriage to the apparatus of state it reaches fulfillment, which we since 30 January 1933 have experienced in Germany. Taking power is not the “revolution” in itself, rather the last part of a revolutionary act.

Visibly, the legal standard, mode of thinking, and dynamic of the revolution — grown upward in decades from the deepest roots of the power of the folk — is transcribed onto the state.

In Germany we have experienced the miracle that without bloodshed, without barricades and machineguns, a revolution completed itself within our folk of 60 million. Its momentum stopped nowhere; with sovereign self-evidence it occupied all areas, and its principle of law rules all affairs. In the course of the past months the men of the revolution have determined the tempo of transformations. The result is a new state!

In the deed was accomplished nothing other than the transcription of the revolutionary standard of legality onto the state. National-Socialist authorities from now on appear as authorities of the state; the laws of the revolution became laws of the state, and the

national-socialist way of thinking was imparted to the nation. Nothing in Germany could have resisted the systematic advance of this historic process.

The revolution would never have succeeded if it had been conducted only for the purpose of usurpation by a group of men whose seizure of power would have been completed without the inner meaning of an idea. In the National-Socialist Revolution a worldview has burst forth!

A worldview — and this is its most essential characteristic — has nothing to do with knowledge. A poor, unknown laborer with a meager store of knowledge can represent a worldview, whereas with a most learned university professor who has complete command of all areas of knowledge, it need not be the case whatsoever. Experience has even taught that the greater the knowledge, often the weaker the courage to a stand up for a worldview.

Worldview is — as the word already says — a specific manner of viewing the world. The prerequisite for it is that this manner of viewing always occurs from the same perspective. As a representative of a worldview, one does not apply different standards to economics than to politics, since cultural life stands in organic interrelation with social life, and foreign policy is considered in organic connection to the domestic political situation. Worldview means always to consider men and their relation to the world, to the state, to the economy, to culture and religion, always from the same perspective.

This process needs no big party-platform; rather it can usually be defined in a short sentence. Of course it matters whether this sentence is true or false. If it is correct it can be the salvation of a folk for several centuries or millennia; if it is false, the system that proceeded from it must fall very soon. From these early signs all great revolutions of history have proceeded. Never did a book or an initialed party-platform stand at the beginning of a revolution, but instead always only a single slogan that cast its shadow over all public and private life.

Thus the great scope of Christian moral doctrine and religion was not at all established by the master of it himself. Christ only clarified the fundamental concept of loving thy neighbor; everything else is the work of the Church Fathers. Loving thy neighbor was so

diametrically opposed to the concepts of the ancient world that there was no understanding between these two poles, and either the Ancient World had to eliminate Christian teaching or Christendom would eliminate Antiquity.

Revolutionaries have no intention of remaining stuck in theory; rather they strike forth from theory into practice and see the unfolding so clearly that all discussion about the realization of principles is superfluous. In the same manner as the doctrines of the Christian revolution and the French revolution, the principles of the National-Socialist Revolution will actualize themselves.

Previously the bourgeois world in Germany jeered: “The program of National-Socialism means no program.” We National-Socialists by contrast felt that we were not church fathers but agitators and pioneers of our doctrine. We had no intention of justifying our worldview scientifically, but of actualizing its teachings, and it should remain the privilege of later ages to have praxis as the knowledge-object of the Idea.7

It should never be the assignment of jurists at the green table to determine the folk’s ways of life. Conceptions that are created on paper never give the conception to a folk. Nature goes beyond science and orders her own life. Thus did it happen also in the National-Socialist Revolution!

Shortly before we took power, scholarship tried to prove that this or that revolutionary process was inconsistent with the existing laws and that one ought not to fear handing over disputes about state-policy to the Supreme Court. We only smiled at the time, for while scholarship asserted that it ought not to be so, matters had for the longest time already been settled.

Scholarship has only the right to interpret a new legality from what already exists, and therefore the law is conditional, resulting from the transcription of our National-Socialist revolutionary legality onto the state. It constitutes the new state of normalcy for the folk and places itself beyond scholarly criticism. The revolution has become reality and only insane reactionaries can believe that any of what we have created can be undone.

National-Socialism is now in the act of gradually stabilizing the revolutionarily formed new legal status quo in Germany. This distinguishes itself fundamentally from the old legality and places itself also beyond the possibilities of criticism that it could itself employ in the old system.

If democracy granted to us democratic methods in times of opposition, so indeed must it have happened in a democratic system. We National-Socialists however have never claimed to be representatives of a democratic viewpoint; rather we have often declared that we merely made use of democratic means in order to gain power, and that we would ruthlessly deny to our opponents all the means that had been afforded to us. Nevertheless we can declare that our government corresponds to the laws of an ennobled [veredelt] democracy.

We have been the sovereign masters of criticism, and today we can unanimously take the position of the law toward criticism. But with one difference: the right of criticism — if it is supposed to have a meaning and not represent a democratic babble — can for a folk's benefit, which indeed must stand above all matters of policy, always only be the priviledge of the smarter over the duller man, and never contrariwise. Thus it would yet remain only to prove that we National-Socialists during the opposition apparently were the smarter.

The other side was in possession of the power, of the army, of the police, of the civil service, of the money, of the parties, and of the parliamentary majority. It controlled public opinion, the press, the radio — in short, everything that one can comprehend under the general concept "power." If however a small group that began with seven men, armed only with the right to criticize the other side, now succeeds in 14 years in challenging this right along with the power of the other side, it seems indisputable who is the smarter. If the other side had been smarter, with such an unequal distribution of the means of success they would have had to find means and opportunities to stop us from dispossessing them. That did not happen. On the contrary, although they succeeded at delaying the organic completion of the revolution for a certain time, the new legality emerged victorious.

IV. A Movement born in the Trenches

On 30 January 1933 as the German Revolution became a manifest reality and the National-Socialist movement was wedded to power, it tended to seem as if it had only erupted on that day. Actually however it had begun much earlier, perhaps already with the outbreak of the war and with the signing of the Versailles Dictate. It had an effect in the course of the years, acquired supporters, formed the community-life of its followers, created new authorities, new forms of existence, new modes of viewing, and a new style, which on the day of taking power,it imparted to the state.

The first day of August 1914 is, historically viewed, the crossroads, and already back then it had to dawn on every historically thinking man: “Where we leave off today, we cannot resume after the Great War.” Nine million German men went through the most frightening physical and spiritual pains; they went through every hell and purgatory of suffering, of human pain and human renunciation and depression. For them it was impossible to resume where they had left off four years earlier.

No — these men brought back from the trenches a new way of thinking. They had experienced in the terrible needs and dangers a new kind of community that never could have been granted to them in happiness. They had learned and experienced the sovereign equalization of death, so that finally only the values of character still continued to exist. At the front, property, education, or a noble name did not matter. No distinction altered the course of bullets that cut down exalted and humble, poor and rich, big and small for eternal equalization. Among men only one single distinction continued to exist: personal merit. Never could the uniform make them equal if one was brave, the other cowardly, if one conducted himself as a man and threw his life into the fieldwork while the other tried to shirk.

It was self-evident that this evaluation would carry over from the trenches into the homeland and that the old “statesmen,” who had remained at home and had no inkling of this new attitude, would reject it. But it was only a question of time until, according to the law of force, the younger, harder, more courageous must vanquish the older and more lacking in courage.

The nine million German front-soldiers knew about the fragility of the regime that they were defending with their lives for the sake of the nation. They had experienced together how the entire world arose against Germany, and had recognized that only with the application of all energies could this threat be turned away.

It became obvious that even the poorest folk-comrade was devoted to his nation, although he had never been conscious of it as his property. He knew nothing about the cultural merits of his country; he knew the names Wagner, Beethoven, Mozart, Goethe, Kant, and Schopenhauer from hearsay at best. He would have been right to say, “The mines and quarries that we want to conquer mean nothing at all to me, since presumably it will be completely irrelevant for me whether I work for a German or a French owner.” Nevertheless one experienced that these men committed themselves to an ideal that, in its broad outlines, they didn’t know at all.

Then later as the severest stress-test came, millions fell away again from this ideal out of ignorance or weakness. But we were no folk-state, for such a state grows from being endangered. A folk will never abandon its own state.

The National-Socialist movement has completed the opposite evolution. In crises, never did party-comrades fall away from the movement, but always only supporters and voters. Party-comrades responded by becoming more ruthless and active to fill the void. Thus would it be also with a folk that remains clearly conscious of the value of its own folk-state. If the men who had risked their lives on the front had possessed a concept of the greatness, the value, and the achievement of a country that they defended, they would never have permitted that in the hour of decision this country fell into the hands of political conmen and profiteers. They would have fought back and would never have permitted the terrible sacrifices that had been made on the front to be bargained away and wasted.

We Germans were never an imperial people8, and therfore also conducted no global politics. At the outbreak of war, the nation was led by a man who was just as bad a philosopher as statesman. Thereafter we did not learn at all from the failure of this man; instead the German statesmen became not younger but older, while on the enemy’s side the opposite occurred.

There, real men stood at the helm, brutal powerseekers totally unencumbered with sentimentality and remorseless in the use of armed forces. They did not let their parliaments spend weeks debating whether a mutinous sailor should be shot; rather they had the nerve to shoot the culprit.

We Germans won the war from a military perspective, but we lost all along the line politically. We had no war-aim and conducted no global politics. For a muddled confusion of vague war-aims the prole was expected to risk his life. And so it happened that our front melted, our folk fragmented, and the concept of the folk-state had no permanence before the hardness of historic unfolding; after an heroically and courageously conducted war the frightful catastrophe necessarily burst upon us. The upright, the best, the German patriots of the deed doubted the future of their folk in those gray November weeks, and many of them perished.

Today we see things differently. We recognize the organic necessity and usefulness of this development, and understand the prophetic word of Moeller van den Bruck: “We had to lose the war to win the revolution!” If we proceed from the assumption that the war represented already a part of the revolution, which happened not in relationships but in men, we come to the conclusion: we had to lose the first part of the revolution in order to come to reflect openly and privately in the second, third, and fourth acts, and finally to win after all!

After the conclusion of the war the enemy invented a peace-treaty for Germany that with elaborate cleverness amounted to destroying the nation of the Germans and finally striking it from the list of world-powers. That, the parties of the Weimar system never recognized. A few years ago even the bourgeois press in Germany still recoiled before the word “tribute” and it was contended that the mere mention of the disgraceful Treaty of Versailles was able to poison relations “in friendship among allied nations.”

We National-Socialists have labored for years making clear to our folk the complicated facts of the enemy’s methods of enslavement. Today in Germany every child in school knows the frightening effects of Versailles and there is no longer any German who is not in the clear about the impact of the tribute-treaty. But 15 years ago the mutinous German chancellor could step before the nation and regarding this disgraceful treaty memorialize the utterance: “The German folk has been victorious all along the line!”

What a change has been accomplished in these 15 years of struggle. One can in fact say: peoples are not always the same; all propensities for good or evil lie in them and it depends always on their leaderships whether nations resolve for good or evil! The German folk of today must not be compared with that of 1918, just as little as the masses of 1918 can be set in comparison with the nation of 1914. Here we are dealing with fundamentally different mentalities, with a different mode of thinking, a new sense of community and a closer cohesion.

[V. — redacted, possibly to be reinserted later.]

VI. National-Socialism means National Unity

Often the private request is made to us National-Socialists to modify this or that terminology and to modify our party-platform. They say: “Why do you people call yourselves socialistic? Social completely suffices! Ultimately we are all social anyway! But take away the baneful harshness of this word and we all would be in fullest agreement.”9

No — we National-Socialists cannot do that, for it is something fundamentally different, if I am presented as “social” or “socialistic, (likewise) if we are presented as “national” or “nationalistic.” Next to the concept “national” usually stands the little word “also” — and that is what matters. Here is the dividing-line between two worlds.

For the National-Socialist however, what the other stresses as the characteristic of his “national” stance is completely meaningless. For him the externalities do not count; rather he has dedicated himself to his folk with flesh and blood, with body and soul. Never will the true nationalist pronounce the empty phrase: “It is sweet and honorable to die for the Fatherland.”10 He is too honest for that and he loathes to degrade his eternal vigilance with drivel in the marketplace of the bourgeois public.

The same applies to the concept of socialism. “I am social!” Usually it is a bank director, lawyer, factory owner, or highly placed civil servant who says that. They want to set up hospitals and halfway houses [Besserungsanhalten] to help the poor man; they admit that things could not go on this way and that something must be changed.

The socialist is elevated above that. He stands on the position: We must all become one folk so that the nation can withstand its crisis. Every sacrifice is right for becoming a folk. I belong to my folk in good and in bad days, and I bear joy and suffering along with it. I know no classes; rather I feel myself purely and simply committed to the nation!

National-Socialism thinks not in the least about a leveling of the German folk and acknowledges every achievement that elevates a man above the multitude of his contemporaries. But fundamentally considered, we are all equal before death, before danger, and before Judgment, and we want to give expression to this equality when we declare our commitment to each other, and never permit a division to arise among us; for there will eventually be times of danger when our folk will need its inner solidarity.

From this viewpoint the much discussed Jewish Question must also be regarded. Even in this case what matters is not the individual sacrifice but purely and simply the welfare of the nation.

We National-Socialists have been in power only one and one-half years. When we took over the government, we obtained before the German people a recovery period of four years. More than one-quarter of this time has expired, and nobody will be able to claim that it was wasted. Perhaps with much malice and dialectic one can reproach us with how much is not yet done. We however can claim with pride that in our state the humanly possible was accomplished. We have prophesied no miracle and therefore nobody should expect a miracle. Ruthlessly and step by step we have tried to stop the wrongs of the age and their development.

We National-Socialists have solved problems in Germany that seemed insoluble: the problem of the reform of the Reich [Reichsreform], of the reform of estates [Stände-

Neuordnung], of party-disunity, and of the creation of popular unity in regard to politics, intellectual life, and worldview. Our government has initiated a successful fight against joblessness such as never happened in the old system. It has attacked winter neediness with unprecedented courage, and also in the future it will continue obsessively to combat unemployment, the frightful disorder of our era.

In the past year the German folk has received a visual demonstration of National-Socialism such that it could not have wished for more. Whoever opposed us earlier with hostility and skepticism today has acquired the conviction that we have successfully pursued the solution of the hardest problems with an honest will. Much else yet remains to be done! We are stepping with youthful strength into the future, and the German folk despite wretchedness and misery has no reason to be in doubt, for it stands already today again on the soil of its own strength.

"Germany will not go under if we have the courage to be stronger than the misfortune that has thrown us all to the ground!"

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1. What could Goebbels possibly mean by this? Machtpolitik refers to foreign relations; surely the NSDAP did not focus its electoral propaganda entirely on that.

2. ihres ganzen Volkes — probably referring to Volksdeutsche, the millions of ethnic Germans outside of Germany, e.g. in Poland.

3. mit den teilweise demokratischen … Staaten — What is Goebbels getting at by qualifying "democratic" with "partly"?

4. irgendwelcher Machtmittel — Such "instruments of power" in several examples that I find refer to armed forces, usually belonging to a government, although it can mean other agencies of government.

5. e.g., Mussolini's march on Rome and the Beerhall Putsch.

6. The Green Table was a ballet by Kurt Jooss that debuted in Paris in 1932. It portrayed politicians as making decisions without regard for how ordinary people would be affected, specifically the decision to fight the First World War.

7. Erkenntnisobjekt der Idee. Philosophical language. Goebbels seems to be invoking the Hegelian concept of progress in history, wherein an idea that dominates an epoch is at first expressed unselfconsciously, and only later after it has some history behind itself, and is able to contemplate its own actions, is it able to explain itself. The implication is that it was unreasonable to expect the new idea of national-socialism to explain itself thoroughly in advance.

8. Weltvolk, “people of the world,” can connote either a people with an empire like the English or a people scattered about the world like the Jews. There may be a some sense of superiority in asserting that the Germans had never been a Weltvolk.

9. The contrast of sozial and sozialistisch is the difference between limited measures to help the poor (social) and an engineered economy (socialist). The socialism of National-Socialism does not include state ownership of the means of production. The fear of socialism was most likely due to its association with the Soviet Union. What Goebbels means by the contrast of national and nationalistisch, I do not know.

10. A line from the Roman poet Horace, Ode III.2.13: Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.